

## **The United States Must Protect Democracy in Georgia**

Since last month's one-year-anniversary of Vladimir Putin's maniacal and unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine, Georgia and other countries in the region have continued their democratic slide towards the Kremlin. Georgia's slide in democracy was again highlighted this week with the release of the [U.S. State Department's Human Rights Report](#), while the global threat to democracy was showcased during the [meeting between President Putin and President Xi Jinping of China](#).

The people of Georgia confirmed their commitment to democracy and their fight against such tyranny earlier this month during protests in the streets in front of the [Parliament building in downtown Tbilisi](#), Georgia, only a few miles from my prison cell where I struggle to stay alive; and where I too continue to defend democracy against Vladimir Putin and his allies. The people of Georgia – who overwhelmingly want to join the European Union and NATO – protested against a newly promulgated "foreign agents" law that requires any organization receiving more than 20 percent of their funding from overseas to register or face criminal charges and substantial fines. This law, [which is analogous to a Russian law](#), is targeted to restrict the work of independent journalists and democratic institutions.

I am a political prisoner in Georgia, the country that I led as President from 2004 to 2013, which I worked hard to re-orient towards the West and democracy.

After only months in power, I was praised by leaders in Europe and the U.S. for championing democracy and free markets and ending a period of *de facto* control of my country by organized criminal syndicates. In 2005, [I was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Senators Hillary Clinton and John McCain](#) for "having won popular support for the universal values of democracy, individual liberty and civil rights."

Feeling threatened by the success of Georgia's western-oriented reforms, Putin ordered the invasion of Georgia in August 2008, and we fought a brief war. Rather than flee, I, like my friend, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, [determined to fight and stood up to Putin's aggression](#). After the war, Russia controlled over 20% of Georgia's territory, which it still holds today (the territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia), but I survived and continued to lead until [stepping down after my second term](#). I presided over the first peaceful transfer of power brought about by democratic elections in the region.

At that time, and for several years after the 2008 War, I tried to warn my Western colleagues of Putin's imperialist ambitions and the threat he posed. While the West expressed much-needed support and solidarity with our cause, few seemed to take the threat of Putin's militarism seriously. Apparently, the [Kremlin's ridiculous narrative](#) that my government somehow provoked the war sewed enough doubt for many in the West to convince themselves that Putin did not have broader aims.



Of course, the war in Ukraine has laid bare [Putin's true imperialist ambitions to restore the Soviet empire](#) by annexing its formerly held territories, but I feel no satisfaction at being proven right. For the man who once threatened to "hang me by the balls" is undoubtedly ultimately responsible for my current predicament.

The political party that came to power after I stepped down, the Georgian Dream, was established and continues to be run behind-the-scenes by [billionaire oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili](#) who made his fortune in 1990s Moscow and is widely understood to have close ties with Putin. Despite overwhelming support among the Georgian people for integration with the EU (an estimated 80% support joining), the Georgian Dream government shows increasing solidarity with Russia. While there is legitimate apprehension about being openly hostile to the Kremlin given the danger Georgia faces, the vast majority of Georgian people support the Ukrainian cause, which the government attempts to suppress.

When I returned to Georgia in October 2021, after 8 years in exile to support free and fair parliamentary elections, I was a healthy, energetic 54-year-old man. I was immediately arrested by the Georgian authorities and have been imprisoned ever since based upon hearsay and politically-motivated charges of "abuse of power" that only the Kremlin and the current Georgian government consider legitimate.

In detention my health has declined precipitously and I am now dying. I have been systematically tortured physically and psychologically, [there is evidence of heavy metal poisoning in my body](#), and I now suffer from a bewildering array of more than 20 serious illnesses, all of which developed in confinement. In mid-February, the European Parliament issued a resolution calling for my release and, noting the democratic backsliding in Georgia, passed non-binding resolutions calling for sanctions against Ivanishvili. Meanwhile, [the Georgian Dream government continues to mock Western leaders](#) and gleefully oversees a rapid drift away from a European future for Georgia, as peaceful civilians are beaten and tear gassed for supporting democratic ideals.

Despite deteriorating relations with America, recently U.S. senators Jeanne Shaheen and Dick Durbin visited Tbilisi to meet with Georgian government officials. While the senators' request to visit me in prison was predictably rejected by the government, I appreciate their interest in my health and well-being. I also commend current Congressional leaders such as Representatives Joe Wilson (SC-2) and Steve Cohen (TN-09), and Senators Roger Wicker (MS) and Ben Cardin (MD), for their efforts against the attacks on Georgia's strategic partnerships, the jailing of political opponents, their opposition to Georgia's foreign agent law, a rebuke to the Georgian People's EU and NATO aspirations, and Georgia's rapid democracy decline. Without the help of Congress, the Biden Administration, together with the EU and UK Parliaments, the current government will continue to turn a blind eye not only to democracy, but the rule of law and the fundamental pillars of human rights will continue to erode.

It is increasingly apparent that I will die soon if I do not receive proper medical care outside of Georgia. I continue to call on the U.S. and the international community to do what they can to

save my life by exerting diplomatic pressure on the Georgian government and imposing economic sanctions against Ivanishvili and his associates. My death may cause political chaos in Georgia but my martyrdom will certainly be considered a victory for Putin, and a powerful symbol to all leaders in this region – and possibly the world – who fail to stand up to Russian imperialism.

If the U.S. Congress and the Biden Administration can work with the E.U. to secure my release through sanctions, economic embargoes, the suspension of funding, and visa restrictions, it will be not only be another blow to Putin, but it will send a strong signal that the U.S. remains committed to the ideals of democracy, decency and justice upon which [President Biden told me I could rely during his visit with me in Tbilisi over a decade ago.](#)

*Mikheil Saakashvili served as president of the Republic of Georgia, 2004-07 and 2008-2013*

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